

# **Giardiasis**

## **FACT SHEET**

### **What is giardiasis?**

Giardiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. It is a common cause of diarrheal illness and over 700 cases are reported in Missouri each year. Cases may occur sporadically or in clusters or outbreaks.

### **Who gets giardiasis?**

Anyone can get giardiasis but it tends to occur more often in people in institutional settings, children in child care centers, foreign travelers, and individuals who drink improperly treated surface water. Homosexual males may also be at increased risk of getting giardiasis.

### **How is this parasite spread?**

The *giardia* parasite is passed in the stool of an infected person or animal and may contaminate water or food. The parasite is also spread by hand-to-mouth transfer from contaminated body surfaces or objects such as toys or diapering areas. Person to person spread may also occur in child care centers where there is close contact between preschool children who have not yet learned good bathroom and handwashing habits.

### **What are the symptoms of giardiasis?**

Most people with giardiasis will not have any symptoms. Others may have mild to severe diarrhea, cramps, bloating, and gas. Occasionally, some will have diarrhea which lasts for several weeks or months, with weight loss.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

The symptoms may appear from five to 25 days after exposure but usually within 10 days.

### **How long can an infected person carry *giardia*?**

The carrier stage generally lasts from a few weeks to a few months. Treatment with specific medication may shorten the carrier stage.

### **Where are the *giardia* parasites found?**

*Giardia* has been found in infected people (with or without symptoms) and wild and domestic animals. The beaver has gained attention as a possible source of *giardia*.

contamination of lakes, reservoirs and streams, but human fecal wastes are probably just as important.

### **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

People with diarrhea need to be excluded from child care, food service or any other group activity where they may present a risk to others. Most infected people may return to work or school when their diarrhea stops if they carefully wash their hands after using the bathroom.

### **What is the treatment for giardiasis?**

Medications such as quinacrine, metronidazole or furazolidone are often prescribed by doctors to treat giardiasis. However, some individuals may recover on their own without medication.

### **What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of giardiasis?**

Three important preventive measures are:

- Carefully wash hands thoroughly after toilet visits or changing diapers and before preparing or eating foods.
- Carefully dispose of sewage wastes so as not to contaminate surface or groundwater.
- Avoid consuming improperly treated drinking water.

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